

Rob Rose Column - 11/15/07

There can only be a handful of people on this planet, who have had the experiences that Paula Bishop has had in her twenty year running career. It's hard to conceive of anyone who has been through the spectrum of moments that she has endured in the past decade.

The Foxboro resident was an ultra runner, completing a 50 mile race several years ago, something that only a minuscule percentage of the running population has accomplished. That was the apex. She also found herself in a position that no runner envisions; going into cardiac arrest on a run. On May 15, Bishop collapsed and lapsed into a coma while running in Foxboro. If not for incredible luck and quick action from public safety personnel, she would not be here today.

"I feel very blessed and lucky," said Bishop. "I try to keep in mind what my husband has been saying since it happened; one really, really bad thing happened followed by the most incredible series of good things so it's all even."

There was no indication that a "really, really bad thing" was going to happen when Bishop drove from her home to the Taylor School so that she could run a favorite route near the Foxboro State Forest. "I had absolutely no signs that anything was wrong," she said. "That's what's so incredibly weird about the entire experience."

The 3.3 mile route for that day would seem to be a short distance for someone who was an ultra runner. But 1999, when she completed the Umstead 50 Miler, was eons ago. "I injured my back after that race and had to take a lot of time off," she said. "I decided that those distances just aren't good for me and tried off and on to get back into running. It wasn't until my neighbor Kim Vacheron asked me to start running with her two years ago that I got back more seriously into it."

Vacheron was with her that morning, a fortunate thing, as they only got to Market St. a little more than a mile into their route. If a calamity had to occur, this was the place for it to happen. "I was a few feet behind her when she put her hands up, said 'Whoa' and collapsed," Vacheron said. Bishop fell in the street and Vacheron began screaming for help. People congregating in the CVS parking lot called 911 and eight to ten emergency personnel quickly descended from the nearby Foxboro Fire Station. "They were having a shift change and they were there in 30 seconds to a minute," she said. "It was the scariest thing I have ever seen. She was completely blue. She was dying on the street."

Paramedics were able to start her heart but she was in a coma

when she was transported to Caritas Norwood hospital. Vacheron accompanied her friend to the hospital and the initial word was not encouraging. Medical personnel were saying 'It doesn't look good' and 'Get your family together and prepare for the worst'. "I went home that night thinking she would die," Vacheron said.

Amazingly, she emerged from the coma the next day. She was transferred to Brigham's & Women's, hospitalized for ten days then released with only short term memory loss and no neurological damage. So what went wrong?

"The doctors searched for an answer to what happened and what caused it," Bishop said. "They never found a satisfactory answer but believe that a freak arrhythmia caused a vasospasm which caused me to go into arrest. The chances appear to very slim that it will ever happen again but just in case they implanted the internal defibrillator. Should my heart ever stop or go into tachycardia again, it will fire and hopefully restore normal function. After they implanted the ICD, they sent me home and told me to resume my normal activities."

How does one resume normal activities just days after such a traumatic event? Bishop immediately started walking and with the encouragement of several neighbors, increased her distance and speed. Then she took the next step. "I was out walking my old route alone and decided to try running a few steps. Those steps turned into two minutes. When I stopped, I nearly jumped for joy thinking, 'I ran and didn't die!'. It absolutely scared me and thrilled me and while it seems careless to have done it while alone, it was absolutely necessary for me because I needed to know that I was okay."

After gaining some confidence, she decided to set a goal that would provide a test but also be in an supportive environment. Could there be anything better than the Columbus Day Tufts 10K?

"The Tufts 10K is a powerful race," said Bishop. "You are surrounded by 7000 other women, each of whom has her own story. Kim Vacheron and I ran the race together from start to finish. Crossing the finish line was an emotional moment given what had happened in May. I felt very thankful to be able to participate in the race, to share that moment with her, to have other women from Foxboro who joined us and to have my friends and family there to cheer me on."

Having no restrictions on her activities, Bishop intends to be out there trying to improve her times. "I plan to just keep running and running," she said. "I don't want to become a real heart patient and this is my way of preventing it. So if you see me out on South St. in Foxboro, honk!"

Footnotes - the Scott Bailey Five Mile race, held for the past

two decades on the first Sunday in December in Framingham, has been canceled; race director Jamie Sarkisian didn't cite a reason but said that "maybe it will start up again"

Congrats to more Boston Marathon qualifiers at recent fall marathons; North Attleboro's Kim Ashworth at Marine Corps; Norton's John Winters and North Attleboro's Christine Bradley at the Manchester (NH) Marathon; Plainville's Doug Strott and Mansfield's Kevin McCormick at Cape Cod ...at the Falmouth in the Fall race, held earlier this month, 53% of the field was women; that's a trend